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ABSTRACT

Highlighting similarities in the processes of reading and writing can help teachers establish a more unified program allowing students to develop skills that transfer from one process to another. One activity to help students develop reading skills focuses on the "who, what, where, when" types of patterns that recur in sentences and stories. One teacher has developed a "Pac Man" game based on this concept. A second group of activities is built around "The Important Book," by Margaret Wise Brown. The teacher reads the book aloud to students who then discover the pattern that repeats itself on each page. Teachers can also have children reconstruct a cut-apart story as a reading comprehension activity, ultimately using their own stories, to focus the children's attention on the sequential construction of many stories. The use of story maps is another useful tool. Students learn to identify common elements of stories such as setting, problem or conflict, and resolution, after which they can create a story map of the story they intend to write. (HTH)

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Bridging the Reading/Writing Gap

By highlighting the similarities in the processes of reading and writing, teachers can establish a more unified program that allows students to develop skills which transfer from one process to another. Such transfer does not occur magically, but frequently needs help from teachers through carefully planned parallel activities in the areas of reading and writing. The base of such a program is founded on three assumptions: 1) reading and writing are both integral parts of a total language arts cycle; 2) both reading and writing are skills which require practice if they are to be improved and refined; and 3) appropriate modeling by teachers is a necessary part of both the reading and writing process. Students should see adults, including teachers, actively engaged in reading and writing.

What follows are some activities, all of which have been used by teachers in classrooms, to bridge the reading/writing gap.

Language Patterns

One activity that teachers have used to help students develop reading comprehension skills is to focus on the "who, what, where, when" types of patterns which recur in sentences and stories. A Carroll County, Maryland teacher developed a Pac Man game based on this concept. Students selected a Pac Man card from an envelop. On each card was written either "who", "what", "when", "where" or "how." After selecting a card, the student had to identify the appropriate element in the sentence, paragraph or story. For example, in Figure 1 (below) the student would need to name a "who" from the story.

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A parallel activity was then developed as a writing activity. Students were to select 2 Pac Man cards and write a sentence which contained both of the elements contained on the cards. As students become better at this game, the teacher may have children select more than 2 Pac Man cards and may require that a paragraph or entire story be developed from the cards.

A second group of activities was built around The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown. The teacher read the book to students who were to discover the pattern which repeats on each page. A sample paragraph is given below.

> The important thing about grass is that it is green. It grows, and it is tender, with a sweet grassy smell. But the important thing about grass is that it is green.

p. 7

The pattern which children discover is that each page of the book begins with the same sentence "The important thing about a _____ is that _____." Each page ends with the sentence repeated as follows: "But the important thing about a _____ is that _____." Between the first and last sentences are additional descriptive sentences about the object. Once students can identify the pattern in a reading context, they are ready for writing. The teacher can provide a ditto as illustrated below:

THE IMPORTANT THING ABOUT A _____

IS THAT _____.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

BUT THE IMPORTANT THING ABOUT A _____

IS THAT _____.

Second graders were able to produce wonderful books based on this pattern (sample pages are below).

The important thing about a rabbit is that it hops. It is white and brown and sometimes has spots. It can hide in the woods. You can use its fur. And twitches its nose. And they jump around. And they are very fidgety. But the important thing about a rabbit is that it hops.

Jenny V.

The important thing about a Teddy Bear is that it is cute. It is soft. It has nice fur. It is cuddly. Sometimes if it is a wind up it will sing you a lullaby. It has soft chubby cheeks that are warm. It has a nice chubby belly and it helps you go to sleep at night instead of counting sheep. But the important thing about a Teddy Bear is that it is cute.

Anne Marie H.

The teacher then took each child's page and bound it in a class "Important Book". Imagine the delight of these second graders when their book was placed in the school library for everyone to read!

Story Structure

Teachers often have children reconstruct a cut-apart story as a reading comprehension activity. One advantage of such an activity is that it focuses the child's attention on the sequential way that many stories are constructed. A writing activity which parallels this is to allow the students to cut apart their stories. If a classmate can't reassemble the story in the proper order, the student may want to make some revisions. In classroom situations this has proven a popular activity with students. They often like to have friends read

their stories and can receive good feedback on ways to make the sequential development of their story clearer.

The use of story maps as described by P. David Pearson (Ginn, 1983) has been a useful tool for teachers in developing reading comprehension skills. Children are encouraged to use the story map over and over to identify the common elements in each story. With teacher guidance students develop a schema for the concept of "story". This schema includes the notion that stories have common elements as indicated below.

SETTING _____

PROBLEM _____

GOAL _____

EVENTS _____

EVENT 1 _____

EVENT 2 _____

EVENT 3 _____

RESOLUTION _____

After much practice using story maps in a reading situation, students are given blank maps on which they insert the outline of the story they plan to write. Once the map is developed, the child can then write a well-planned

story. Teachers can adjust this activity so that the map includes a limited number of elements for beginners or a more complete list for older students. In either case, the end result tends to be a story which is better constructed than stories which children write without the benefit of an aid such as a story map.

Conclusions

Activities such as the ones described on the preceding pages have proven enjoyable for children in classrooms throughout the state of Maryland. They illustrate that the notion of parallel activities to develop reading and writing skills is not a dream, but a reality. With careful planning all teachers are able to identify activities which they are already using to teach either reading or writing which may have a parallel application. The net result can be a step toward a unified language arts program. And the ultimate beneficiaries are the students.